

The Michigan Education Association opposes Senate Bill 280. As written, the legislation prohibits local school boards and local associations from bargaining union release time. It is our belief that local school boards and local bargaining units better understand the needs of their district than those outside the school district.

Many local contracts provide some release time. In the vast majority of contracts, that release time is in a “bank” where school employees can access it for a variety of reasons, including professional development conferences and school improvement committees. In larger districts, school boards and local bargaining units have bargained release time for a local president to deal with the myriad of issues that arise between the parties. Both the school boards and the unions see the necessity of bargaining release time for the leader of the association to work with school administrators to address those issues. While both the administrator and the union official are working during the school day, the use of release time has proven to be a cost effective way to deal with many labor relations issues.

The model for release time was originally adopted from the private sector. A few years ago, we saw labor leaders work with auto industry executives to structure a plan to save the auto industry. The job of those labor leaders was to work collaboratively with the executives of the company to keep the company in business. Similarly, we have seen the same work being done in a number of school districts, most recently in the Flint Public Schools. In that district, release time leaders worked with school administrators to put together a plan to keep the district from financial disaster. The collaboration between the release time union leaders and district administrators over financial concessions and layoffs prevented a state takeover with an emergency manager, saving the district millions of dollars. With an ever increasing number of large school districts facing financial crises, release time become more crucial than ever.

One of the primary concerns expressed when SB 280 was introduced is the use of taxpayer dollars. In some cases, the local association reimburses the district for release time, while in others the parties negotiate release time as a cost of doing business. If it is done during school hours, both the administrator and the release time employee are being paid with tax dollars. When school boards use outside legal assistance in collective bargaining and other labor relations matters, that too is paid for with taxpayer dollars. However, just as in the case of release time, the local school board has made a local decision that this is an efficient use of tax dollars.

We feel strongly that this decision at the local level is one that should not be judged by legislators who are not dealing with issues that local school boards and administrators face on a daily basis. Much credence is often given to the concept of “local control.” A few weeks ago, the chairman of this committee testified at the House Education Committee hearing on the teacher evaluation legislation, strongly supporting the concept of local control in choosing what evaluation instrument should be used in evaluating teachers. If local control is important, it should be consistently supported. SB 280 rejects the concept of local control.